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A Letter from Morgan Odoherty

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Notes and Documents

A Letter from Morgan Odoherty

One of the brightest features of William Blackwood's beloved *Maga* in its early years was the sprightly succession of parodies, epistles, poems, and mock-translations that appeared in the magazine over the name of Morgan Odoherty, the wild Irish adjutant. Several contributors to *Blackwood's Magazine* used the name Odoherty (most notably William Maginn), but between 1819 and 1822 at least eight (and perhaps nine) of Odoherty's articles and poems were the work of David Macbeth Moir (1798-1851), a Musselburgh physician.¹

Among the 500-odd letters from Moir to various members of the Blackwood family, now in the Blackwood Collection in the National Library of Scotland, one letter exists over Odoherty's name which was almost certainly intended for publication.² For reasons readily apparent the letter was not printed in the magazine, and Moir soon after gave up the character of Odoherty once and for all. Thenceforth he employed his talents in a more congenial vein and ultimately achieved considerable renown as *Blackwood's* versifying "Delta" and as the author of *Mansie Waugh*.

Obviously this letter does not represent Morgan Odoherty at his best, though with its thinly veiled allusions to contemporary writers and

¹For a complete examination of the problem of authorship of the Odoherty papers see Ralph Wardle's "Who Was Morgan Odoherty?" *PMLA*, LVIII (Sept. 1943), 716-727 and my supplementary note, "David Macbeth Moir as Morgan Odoherty" *PMLA*, LXXII (Sept. 1957), 803-806.

²Through the courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, I received photostatic copies of Moir's letters several years ago. A fellowship from the Fund for the Advancement of Education (1955-56) and a grant-in-aid from the American Philosophical Society (1958) enabled me to work with the Blackwood Collection in Edinburgh.

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its humorously insulting criticisms, it is typical of much of *Maga's* early wit.

EUGENE NOLTE

ARKANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE

Village of Muttonhole 1st May [1823]

My dear Fellow,

You may remember that the last time you spoke to me about having a sharp look out among the rising literary shavers, I acquainted you of my having fallen in, on board of a Steam-packet, with a young countryman of my own, whom I thought of the true sort. I have since cultivated his friendship a little more, and kidnapped (with his consent,) a half handful of his loose papers. These I send for your inspection.³

It is a sage remark, that all young writers are prone to imitation; parodying and bedevilling the passages of other authors, which may have most tickled their fancy. My young friend Dennis O'Brien (a half-cousin, six times removed, of the famous giant,)⁴ cannot be said to be an exception to this universal law of incipient scribblerism. Originality he may have; (in the same way as Jeffrey is a poet, and Macintosh a historian,)⁵ only he has not yet thought proper to show it; but, it rather strikes me, that he is a supplementary genius like Macvey,⁶ or like Barry Mirandola,⁷ a kind of mocking bird; taking off other bards, by cuckooing their jargon.

³ The papers that accompanied this letter (i.e. "Jack Jenkins," the "lyrical invitation," the "Ode to the Ambrosians," and "The Fall of Stocks") were apparently never used in the magazine.

⁴ Patrick Cotter (1761-1806), an Irish giant who took the name O'Brien, was a well-known figure at fairs and fetes during his lifetime. He is reputed to have been 8 feet 7 inches tall.

⁵ Francis Jeffrey wrote huge quantities of verse but, of course, is remembered only as a critic. The Rt. Hon. Sir James Macintosh (1765-1832) was a famous political and moral philosopher, essayist, and orator. His attempts at history, *The History of England* and *Review of the Causes of the Revolution*, were neither ever completed.

⁶ Macvey Napier (1776-1847) was Jeffrey's successor in 1829 to the editorship of the *Edinburgh Review*. Prior to that time, he was occupied in editing the 6th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and writing much of the "Supplement" to this edition.

⁷ "Barry Cornwall" (Bryan Proctor, 1787-1874) was the author of *Mirandello, a Tragedy* which was performed with great success at Covent Garden in 1821.

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You have indulged Time's Whispering Gallery with his New Forest Pauper,⁸ Mademoiselle C. with her broken Bridge,⁹ and Delta with his Peter Ledyard;¹⁰ shut not up, then, thy bowels of compassion on the amiable, wild Irishman, young Dennis; even although Jack Jenkins should tread too closely on the kibes of Peter Bell, Simon Lee, Goody Blake, and other eminent characters; for he is a rare fellow. Insert him, and I will speedily give you something of the kind myself, as I have done nothing for you in that line, since the days of the Auncient Waggonere, and of Billy Routing, *** *****.¹¹

It is astonishing, that you have so long puzzled yourself, and the world, through the medium of *Maga*, with surmises about the school of poetry to which I belong. It is high time to put you on the right scent. The truth is (for out it must come,) that I have been long aiming at the accomplishment of a favourite object, which I hoped the optics of the wise of the earth would have long ago observed, which is, the title of "Patriarch of the Universal School." From this, it should follow naturally, that my disciples, dividing themselves into sections, would form distinct groupes, all acknowledging me for their head, as thus—

Universal School

Romantic School	Lake School
Artificial School	Flemish School
Leg of Mutton School	Cockney School
Satanic School	Jessamy School

Scott and Wordsworth should thus be my Lieutenant Generals; Campbell and Byron my colonels; Crabbe my Ajutant Parson O'Butterall, chaplain; Hunt and Reynolds ensigns,¹² Webbe bugleman;¹³ Mother Morgan and

⁸ "The New-Forest Pauper: A Lyrical Ballad" appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in Sept. 1821, the work of R. F. St. Barbe who later contributed a series of papers called "Time's Whispering Gallery" in February, March, and April 1823.

⁹ C[aroline Bowles Southey's] "The Broken Bridge" appeared in the magazine in January 1823.

¹⁰ Moir's "Peter Ledyard, a Lyrical Ballad" had appeared in August 1822.

¹¹ These two poems were published in the magazine in February and July 1819. The asterisks are in place of two undecipherable words in Sanscrit (?).

¹² Leigh Hunt was constantly castigated as a "Cockney" in *Maga*. John Hamilton Reynolds, a minor poet, was a friend of Hunt and his circle.

¹³ This probably refers to Cornelius Webbe, always called "Corny" Webb in *Maga*. For many years he was a proofreader of the *Quarterly Review* and a minor contributor to several periodicals.

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Maria Williams camp-suttlers,¹⁴ and Barry Cornwall, (in green,) the Ganymede of the Mess-table.¹⁵

I told Dennis of my design, and asked him what school he would be of, as I wished to give him his place, amid the 1099 names in my tabular arrangement. The young dog had the assurance to answer that he was a candidate for the Universal School, and would show me his claims to that effect. He straightway exposed to me a quarto, filled with all variety of manners and measures from Shakespeare and Spenser down to Leigh Hunt and Willison Glass.¹⁶ I doubt the Yahoo shall make good his claims of poetical relationship to me. Be it so—I am not one of those who like the Turk can bear “no rival near my throne.”¹⁷

It appears that, when on his travels, young O'Brien resided ten days at the Cat and Bag-pipe Hotel, near Temple-bar, and that he there made an accidental acquaintance with the Centurian, who was reading the Examiner Newspaper over a Welch rabbit, and a decanter of swipes. Sonnets instantly flew between them, like Congreve rockets at the siege of Copenhagen; and now, when separated, Dennis compliments him with a lyrical invitation in his own way. Give me your notion of it.¹⁸

The Ode to the Ambrosians was, I strongly suspect, translated from the Sanscrit on the very same evening, that the Patriotic Ode in your

¹⁴ Lady Morgan [Miss Sydney Owenson] (1783?-1859), an Irish lady, had a prodigious output of poetry, travel literature, novels, reform tracts, etc. throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Helen Maria Williams (1762-1827), also a prolific writer of verse and fiction, was best known as an interpreter of French politics and as a translator of French books. A brief critique of both women appeared in *B. M.*, XII, 658.

¹⁵ From a critical point of view, Odoherty's tabular arrangement of the poets compares quite favorably with Byron's “triangular *Gradus ad Parnassum*” in his Journal entry of 24 November 1813. See *The Works of Lord Byron. Letters and Journals*, II, 343-344.

¹⁶ Willison Glass, whoever he was, appeared in the first “Noctes Ambrosianae” (March 1822) to sing a song entitled “Dialogue Between Willison Glass, Esq. of Edinburgh, and Jeremy Bentham Esq. of London.”

¹⁷ “Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne.”

Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, 197-8.

¹⁸ This entire paragraph is mildly satirical of Coleridge, some of whose early sonnets were written at the Salutation and Cat, a hotel near Christ's Hospital which Coleridge patronized in his early London years. A letter from Charles Lamb to Coleridge on December 2, 1796, conjures up the atmosphere: “That sonnet, Coleridge, brings afresh to my mind the time when you wrote those on Bowles, Priestley, Burke;—’twas two Christmases ago, and in that nice little smoky room at the Salutation, which is even now continually presenting itself to my recollection, with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, egg-hot, welsh-rabbit, metaphysics, and poetry.”

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March N^o changed its dress from the Spanish.¹⁹ This is a psychological curiosity. Could Mr Coleridge explain it, think you?

As I am not among the number of the Eleusinians, the male Miss McAvoy's, who see with their eyes shut,²⁰ mysteries are consequently to me like mill-stones, I cannot see through them. I leave such gentry to relish "The Fall of Stocks" which Dennis assured me a tip-top, table talking critic reckons equal to Cornwall's "Fall of Saturn," which (Hew! me misere,) instead of being sublime, as was too evidently intended, appeared to me only a rapsody, dedicated to a simple and silly Lamb by a horse-aping, caracoling jackass.²¹

Like a good boy, show my young friend the dexter side of thy countenance, for he is so modest and unassuming, that a rebuff would annihilate him; or at least lower him down to the calibre of the London or New Monthly.

I hope the salmon I hooked for you was good; when I may be able to send you another, Heaven knows, as fish are as scarce in the Almond as *bon bons* in Jeffreys Review. Phillpotts is true game, and nails his colours to the mast.²²

Yours &c &—

Morgan Odoherty

To. C. North Esq

¹⁹ "Patriotic Ode. From the Spanish Gazette of Madrid, 1st March, 1823," written by Moir, appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in March 1823.

²⁰ Margaret M'Avoy (1800-1820) was a blind lady alleged to have been able to distinguish colors by touch and to decipher letters with her finger ends.

²¹ "The Fall of Saturn" was one of the poems in Barry Cornwall's *Flood of Thessaly and other Poems*, reviewed in *Blackwood's* in May 1823.

²² The magazine for April 1823 (pp.476-478) ended with a letter from the Rev. H. Phillpotts in reply to a "Note on Dr. Phillpotts" by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, XXXVIII (Feb. 1823), 265-269.